

The Wetlands Project Site Registry: Benefits for Landowners and Habitat

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THE WETLANDS PROJECT SITE REGISTRY: BENEFITING LANDOWNERS AND WETLAND HABITAT

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Wetland restoration and wildlife habitat enhancement is desired by many landowners. Current conservation practices can provide additional revenue from hunting leases or nature tourism, and can protect the integrity of a parcel of land for either a period of years, or in perpetuity. However, because the cost of establishing such habitat is often prohibitive, many landowners are unable to complete this restoration on their own. With over 97 percent of Texas lands in private ownership, providing incentives to help landowners conserve wetlands is of critical importance. Although many incentive programs are currently available, the findings of the Texas Wetlands Conservation Plan indicate the need for additional non-regulatory conservation programs geared toward private landowners. The most recent of these programs is the Wetlands Project Site Registry. This program takes a novel approach to the issue of wetlands conservation by merging the wants of landowners with the requirements of those obligated to mitigate for wetlands lost during the process of development. The Registry is intended to both improve the quality and diversity of mitigation wetlands and satisfy the goals of the landowner.

Background

Wetland mitigation occurs most often on publicly-owned property, such as federal wildlife refuges or state parks or wildlife management areas. These areas are attractive because restoration needs on public lands are generally known by the managing agency, they are easily accessible, and private property issues are avoided. Ongoing restoration of our public wetlands benefits the ecosystem, the wildlife, and the people who enjoy these areas; however, work on public lands targets properties that are already under some degree of protection or management. To truly impact the Texas landscape, it is necessary to expand this type of wetlands conservation to our abundant private lands. Private lands have primarily been overlooked for mitigation because there has been no organized tool to locate the best restoration opportunities.

What is the Registry?

The Wetlands Project Site Registry is a voluntary, non-regulatory alternative for landowners desiring wetlands conservation on their property. Like "want ads", the Registry functions to link those who need or want to restore wetlands with interested property owners. The Registry consists of an Internet accessible database of public and private sites that are available for wetlands restoration throughout Texas. Landowners can use the Registry to describe their property, indicate their interest in wetlands restoration and their personal conservation goals, while agencies searching for wetlands to restore can access the database to identify potential properties that meet their needs.

The Registry has been active on the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Internet site since

August, 1998. Currently, the Registry lists over 35,000 acres of wetlands and wetland associated uplands available for conservation on the properties of over 100 private landowners throughout the state. To compliment this list, a database of wetland projects available on public lands was added in late 1998. The public lands database currently lists over 60 projects, and like the private lands database, we expect this number to continue growing throughout the year.

Public lands project descriptions include contact information and a map of the project area; however, because of legal obligations to maintain the confidentiality of private landowners, the specific details of private lands sites are released only with the permission of the landowner. Once contact between these two parties has been established, the process of developing a mitigation plan will continue as it does currently. Landowners who agree to have mitigation sites on their property retain ownership, the right to restrict access, and may arrange mutually-beneficial financial agreements with a developer; however, landowners must be aware that certain restrictions on land use may apply based upon the terms negotiated in a permanent easement.

While agencies and individuals search for lands to restore, landowners search for opportunities to generate income and restore habitat on their land. Mitigation on private lands not only adds diversity to the landscapes from which to select the best mitigation site, but provides an economic incentive to landowners to conserve, not convert, their wetlands. The Registry is intended to help those Texas landowners already interested in wetlands restoration achieve their goals while greatly increasing the quantity and diversity of landscapes from which the best mitigation sites may be selected.